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## **PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ABUSE: Promoting Safe and Stable Families**

### **2003 REPORT OF THE GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY BOARD ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

#### Purpose

The Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect serves to advise the Governor, the Board of Social Services, and the Department of Social Services on matters concerning programs for the prevention and treatment of abused and neglected children and their families. Since its inception, the Board has recognized that "child abuse is a complex problem [for which] there is no one solution. Child abuse is a community problem requiring many combined community strategies for treatment and prevention."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this report is to highlight family structure, one of the many elements that should be considered when exploring the underlying factors that affect the incidence of child abuse and neglect. The structure of family in the United States has fragmented over the past two generations, as a result of increased incidence and social acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, and unwed childbearing. Research indicates that different family structures can impact outcomes for children in both positive and negative ways. For children, growing up in a low conflict family with two married, biological parents is associated with outcomes that are more positive.<sup>2</sup>

## **Statement of the Problem**

Each year in the state of Virginia, nearly 9,000 children are victims of abuse and neglect in founded cases:

- Child neglect comprises 57 percent of founded cases.
- Child physical abuse occurs in 27 percent of founded cases.
- Sexual abuse constitutes 12 percent of these cases.
- Mental abuse and medical neglect each comprise two percent of founded cases.<sup>3</sup>

## **Factors Contributing to the Problem of Child Maltreatment**

The Board recognizes that child abuse is a complex problem requiring various strategies for prevention and treatment. Factors commonly associated with the incidence of child abuse and neglect include poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and a child's disability.

- Poverty creates stresses that often overwhelm the coping abilities of families. The majority of families reported for neglect are also poor.<sup>4</sup> Compared to children whose families earned \$30,000 or more per year, children in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 per year were more than 44 times more likely to be neglected.<sup>5</sup>
- Male employment increases the likelihood that a father will become involved with his children's lives through visits, financial support, and marriage.<sup>6</sup>
- The total number of minor children living with a substance-abusing parent in the United States is estimated to be 9-10 million. Children of substance abusers may receive sporadic and irregular care and are more likely to be subject to homelessness and crime, including sexual abuse and physical abuse, due to unreliable and erratic parental behavior.<sup>7</sup>
- Abuse and neglect can result from pathologies in the mental and emotional functioning of parents.<sup>8</sup> In a Virginia review of CPS cases opened for on-going services, mental health counseling/treatment was found to be the service most often provided to families after CPS case management.
- Adult domestic violence and child maltreatment often occur together. Children of battered women are also maltreated in 30 percent to 60 percent of the cases. Those who witness violence in their homes also suffer trauma.<sup>9</sup>
- The National Coalition on Abuse and Disabilities estimates that 18,000 children per year are permanently disabled by abuse and neglect or suffer mental retardation or sensory and motor impairments. Conversely, disability increases the risk of maltreatment.<sup>10</sup>

## **Impact of Family Structure on Child Abuse and Neglect**

A growing body of research has shown an association between the departure from married, two-parent families headed by the child's mother and father and the increased risk of child abuse and neglect. The data indicate that children are, on average, safer from abuse and neglect in homes where the child's biological parents are married.<sup>11</sup>

- A key finding from The *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* is that “children of single parents had a 77 percent greater risk of being harmed by physical abuse, an 87 percent greater risk of being harmed by physical neglect, and an 80 percent greater risk of suffering serious injury or harm from abuse or neglect than children living with both parents.”<sup>12</sup>
- A medical study by C.D. Siegel, *et al.*, (1996), showed a higher risk of death from intentional injury among young children living in single-mother homes.<sup>13</sup>
- A study conducted by Leslie Margolin found that a young child who is left alone with a mother's boyfriend experiences a substantially elevated risk of physical abuse.<sup>14</sup>
- More recently, a study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found “children living in households with one or more male adults that are not related to them are at increased risk for maltreatment injury death. This risk is not elevated for children living with a single parent, as long as no other adults live in the home.”<sup>15</sup>
- The increasing mobility of society and the resulting breakdown in extended family relationships has also resulted in families that suffer from isolation from kinship and community support, making abuse and neglect more likely to occur and less likely to be quickly identified and confronted.<sup>16</sup>
- Research using data from the Fragile Families study indicates that marriage initiatives could have positive effects on the well-being of children in a number of cases. One-third of unmarried parents face few barriers to marriage. Another third could potentially benefit from marriage programs if the programs were enhanced with services that address employment issues, substance abuse, and mental health problems. However, in a third of the population, marriage initiatives are unlikely to work because the parents are not romantically involved or because of a history of violence that may make marriage an unsafe environment for children.<sup>17</sup>

## **Recommendations**

In light of the potential for the increased risk of abuse and neglect in families that depart from the stable unit of the two-parent family, headed by biological parents in a low-conflict marriage, the Board recommends that Virginia take the following actions to promote safe and stable families:

- Encourage and facilitate further research and better data collection regarding family structure and child well-being, as well as factors that facilitate the formation and continued vitality of strong and stable families. Currently, Virginia does not collect demographic information as part of its marriage and divorce statistics, nor does it collect such data as part of its child abuse and neglect investigations.
- Encourage premarital counseling to help ensure a better foundation for marriages before they begin. Marital and relationship counseling should be readily available and affordable to anyone desiring such counseling.
- Encourage the development of public awareness campaigns that stress the importance of having two loving and involved parents in a child's life.
- Develop and disseminate materials to help educate parents about:
  - The positive impact marriage can have for child-rearing and relationship conflict resolution skills;
  - The impact of domestic violence on children; and
  - The proper screening of caretakers and other household members who are left alone with children.
- Include in high school family life education classes information on the factors that place children at higher risk of child abuse and neglect, including a positive introduction to the importance of family structure and stability on a child's well-being and the proper screening of caretakers and other household members who are left alone with children.
- Explore ways to access new federal funds for marriage promotion programs and find ways to use these funds to encourage innovative approaches to promote stronger and more stable marriages.
- Ensure that Virginia's tax laws do not create disincentives to marriage, especially any penalties in state welfare laws and means-based welfare programs.
- Develop a coordinated Prevention Plan with an integrated approach to combine strategies for promoting a safe and stable family structure with other strategies for preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.
- Expand marriage programs with services for employment, substance abuse, and mental health needs for couples who could benefit from these services.
- Ensure that measures put in place to encourage or preserve marriage do not place anyone in a situation that would threaten their safety or well-being.

## **Conclusions**

The Board recognizes that individual circumstances vary widely and that no individual should be regarded as a probable child abuser simply because he/she is not part of a married, two-parent family. Many homes headed by single parents, relatives, or foster parents provide safe and nurturing environments for children to grow and thrive.

Therefore, the Board's recommendations relating to family structure should in no way be viewed as failing to recognize or devaluing the love and hard work exerted by any family on behalf of their children. The Board further recognizes that violent, fragile, unstable, or otherwise unhealthy marriages may put children at a greater risk of abuse.

The Board wishes to call attention to correlations indicating that children are safest in a strong and stable family, and that marriage is an important factor in creating that strength and stability. A healthy marriage is an expression of commitment not only to the spouse, but also to the children in the home.

The Board is committed to further exploring broader policy recommendations designed to help prevent child abuse and neglect through programs and services that address the multitude of other factors impacting parents' ability to be a positive and loving influence on their children.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>7</sup> "Substance Abuse and Child Maltreatment," *Virginia Child Protection Newsletter*, Volume 53, Spring 1998.
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- <sup>13</sup> Siegel, C.D., et al, "Mortality from Intentional and Unintentional Injury Among Infants of Young Mothers in Colorado, 1986-1992." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, Volume 150 (1996).
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- <sup>15</sup> Micheal N. Stiffman, et al., "Household Composition and Risk of Fatal Child Maltreatment," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (April 2002).
- <sup>16</sup> "Strengthening America's Families," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), 1999, p. 5 - 12).
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